Cannibals of Indiana

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Edited By

IVAN GEROULD GRIMSHAW, Ph.D., (EDINA)

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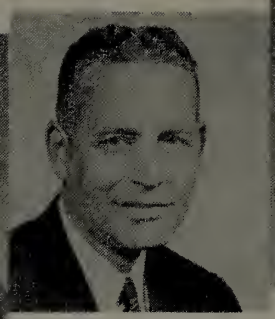

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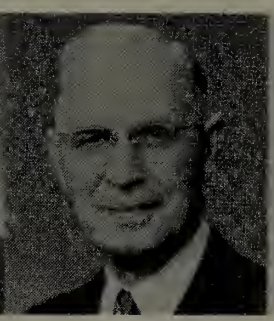

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This brochure was adapted from an article which appeared in the INDIANAPOLIS NEWS, July 6, 1891; the article was signed with the initials E. F. C. Research on the part of Rex M. Potterf, Chief Librarian of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County, revealed the initials to be those of Edward F. Colerick, the father of Miss Margaret Colerick. She served as the Public Library's head librarian from 1898 to 1934 and was Mr. Potterf's immediate predecessor.

CANNIBALS OF INDIANA

The writer began by pointing out that there was one spot only on the North American continent of which we have authentic account, where man-eating people dwelt, and that dark spot was found within the geographical limits of what is now the states of Indiana and Illinois. Here, for many hundred years, prior to the beginning of the nineteenth century, dwelt a society of savages belonging to the Minneways, or Twightwees, known as man-eaters. These anthropophagi were designated man-eaters for they devoured the bodies of prisoners of war burned at the stake.

His first person narration then continued as follows:

While a resident of Fort Wayne, Indiana, (over fifty years ago) where the Miami and Pottawatamie Indians then resided, I had often seen a very old, shriveled-up squaw, a repulsive-looking creature, who was said to be descended from a family of man-eaters belonging to the Miami tribe of Indians.

I remember one Sabbath afternoon in the month of September that I took a stroll with my aged friend, Jean Battiste Bruno, an old French Indian trader, then at least eighty years old, a very intelligent man, well-preserved, and possessing an extraordinary good memory. We had reached a beautiful spot, a little grove which skirted the banks of the St. Joseph river, a mile above town.

Seated upon a log on the elevated bank of the stream, he gave me a thrilling description of the terrible defeat of General Harmar at this point in 1791. My friend had been a spectator at this engagement, so sanguinary and disastrous in its results. While he was talking, a canoe with several Indians in it was passing down the stream. On discovering Bruno, the paddlers of the canoe headed for the shore, landing at our feet. I at once recognized that same disgusting old hag of a squaw as one of the party. After a short talk with Bruno, they turned into the stream again and passed on to the town.

I then told my companion the oft-repeated story that I had heard regarding this woman. He said that it was true. He had known her for forty years. She was the daughter of White Skin, the last head of the family of man-eaters. Bruno reported that he had known her father since 1785 when he (Bruno) had first come to this part of the country to trade with the Indians. White Skin, although at that time said to be nearly a hundred years old, was active, and an industrious man, possessed of a very retentive memory. The family of White Skin consisted of the old man, an aged son, and their daughter. They lived on Eel river some miles west of the village of Turtle, the home of the great war chief of the Miamis, Little Turtle. This dwelling place was about thirty-five miles northwest of Fort Wayne. Far and near they were known as the man-eating family. They lived very secluded lives, seemingly shunned by the other Indians. They had no friends with the exception of Father Badden, a French missionary who served many years in that section of the country. He frequently visited them and helped them when they were in want.

White Skin and his family were tanners, dressers of deer skins and preparers of buckskin. For many years Bruno had traded with them, purchasing their skins for the Detroit market, where he found a ready sale for them. He generally went to their camp to make purchases and

often had to remain overnight at their hut. Thus he became intimately acquainted with them. However, he seldom partook of meals with them, for they were too filthy in their manner of living and were too fond of dog meat to suit him. Bruno declared he had often eaten dog meat, but it was prepared in a very different manner from the way they served it.

Bruno found that White Skin was not reluctant to talk with him about the charges that White Skin was a man-eater. Bruno gained the Indian's entire confidence. As a result he secured from White Skin a history of the man-eating society. This Bruno described as follows:

One beautiful moonlight night, while seated upon the grass in front of a bark hut, smoking their Kinnikinic, the old man gave Bruno an entire history of that part of his life connected with the order of man-eaters. Later Bruno was to repeat the story so often that he came to "know it by heart."

White Skin declared that to eat human flesh was a religious rite conferred upon his forefathers many generations earlier, when the Minneways included most of the Indians living on the east side of the big river (the Mississippi). On the death of White Skin's grandfather, his father and his father's only brother became the sole representatives of the order, each having the right to perform the ceremonies at these human sacrifices.

White Skin when asked how often he had eaten human flesh, and whether he assisted in killing those to be devoured, replied that he did not participate in the killing since those eaten were always prisoners of war, generally Indians from hostile tribes, although now and then there was a pale face. He pointed out also that in his younger days he participated in a great many of these feasts. All who partook liked the taste of human flesh, for it was much sweeter than the flesh of wild animals. However, it was never eaten merely for the purpose of satisfying hunger. Rather, it was partaken of solely as

a religious rite. Naturally, some of the Indians invited to partake would eat more than others. White Skin reported that his brother and sister liked human flesh so well that they would eat until they were full. At this time White Skin had not tasted human flesh for over twenty years. The Catholic missionaries had done much to stop the sacrifices and as time went on the custom generally declined.

Mr. Bruno reported that when White Skin was twenty years old he attended a grand feast of this kind held on the east bank of the St. Joseph river near Ke-ki-on-ga. This spot, Bruno indicated, was on a rise of ground, a plateau of about five acres, about a mile from Fort Wayne.

The Indians were notified the day before to be at the place of sacrifice the following afternoon. White Skin and his kin reached the grounds about noontime. The faces of the entire family were painted black, even that of the little papoose on its mother's back. A crowd of several hundred Indians had already assembled, anxiously waiting for the ceremonies to begin. The prisoner, a Sauk Indian, who was perfectly naked and fastened to a stake, was chanting his death song. He was very brave. When the sun was about two hours high, a squaw approached with a torch in her hand to ignite the faggots. The doomed prisoner snatched the flambeau from her hand and set fire to his own funeral pile. At this act of bravery the entire crowd set up shouts of applause and admiration. When dead, the body was laid upon the burning coals until it was well cooked. After a prolonged ceremony the father of White Skin cut off a piece for each member of the family, presenting it to them upon a sharpened stick, or skewer, while they sat in a circle around the fire. After the family were helped, the father of White Skin asked in a loud voice if there was any person present who wished to participate in the feast. Several men and squaws came forward and seated

themselves in the circle. They, too, were helped as the others had been. While the feasting was going on, deep silence prevailed. Just as the sun went down behind the tree tops, it was announced that the ceremonies were ended. A yell went up which shook the earth, and the carcass was left for the dogs to eat.

To Bruno, White Skin also related that when later his father and brother[1] were murdered while asleep in camp on their return from one of these human sacrifices held near the mouth of the Wabash River, he became the head of the order.

Asked if he ever conducted any of these ceremonies, White Skin said that he had done so only once, some twenty years earlier. That was also the last time that he had tasted human flesh. This event he outlined as follows:

His father's brother, a very old man, was head of the order. He lived on the Calumet River near Calumet Lake, and the father of White Skin had often gone over there to assist in conducting their feasts. This uncle died the same summer the father was killed; and his blanket fell upon the shoulders of his only child, a daughter, an old decrepit woman.

Soon after her father's death a prisoner was to be sacrificed, and she sent a messenger to White Skin inviting him and his family to come to assist her in the ceremonies. They got ready and returned with the messenger.

On reaching the village, they found the old woman very sick in her wigwam and unable to take part in the exercises; so White Skin had to assume responsibility. The prisoner was a white man, a fact which gladdened

[1] One would assume in the light of White Skin's earlier statements that the man here referred to was White Skin's father's brother (an uncle). However, the mss. is not clear at this point.

the heart of White Skin who did not like to eat the flesh of his own race but had no objection to eating the greatest enemy of his people, the white man. There were not many Indians in attendance due to a big hunt, but everything passed off with much satisfaction. About the usual number of invited guests shared in the feast. At the request of the old woman, White Skin took her a bit of flesh which she ate with apparent relish. The next day she died.[2] The old woman's death left White Skin as the sole representative of this once great society. However, never after that day was there conducted by the society of man-eaters a sacrifice of human life at which the flesh was eaten.

The point where these Calumet festivities were held was where now is located the city of Chicago, and not a great distance from where the bloody massacre of Fort Dearborn occurred in 1812. There the brave Captain William Wells was killed by the treacherous Pottawatomies, the meanest and most detestable tribe of Indians in the Northwest. When Wells fell, pierced by a dozen bullets, his murderers cut off his head, cut out his heart and cooked it, then cut it into small particles which were eaten with avidity by those who were lucky enough to secure a piece. Each Indian believed religiously that this would make him as brave as he from whom it was taken. This, according to Bruno, was, no doubt the last time the Indians of this region ever ate human flesh.

Other evidences of these former practices are by no means lacking. In the year 1836 Mr. Colerick heard Father Theodore Budden, the old and well-known Catholic missionary, declare that it was a well established fact that there was, at a time not far removed, an organization existing among the Miamis known as the man-eating society; and that he personally was acquainted with the

[2] This and the previous fact appear to have had no apparent relationship in the mind of Mr. Colerick.

two last representatives (survivors) of this dreadful order. One of them, Kee-wan-see-ah, lived near where now is located the city of Chicago. He further stated that the early missionaries bore ample testimony to the existence of the society of man-eaters and to their efforts its suppression was due. Father Budden spent sixty years of his life among the Indian tribes of the Northwest and died in Fort Wayne about the year 1842, aged ninety years.

The missionary Breboeuf, in 1634, in a report of his missionary work among the Indians of the Northwest filed in the archives of the Catholic church of Montreal, Canada, referred to the cannibals (man-eaters) found among the Minneways, and he did much to stop this horrid usage. He reported that these Indians became so fond of human flesh that they, no doubt, frequently committed murder in order to gratify this horrid appetite.

> According to the statements of Chief Richardville and Mr. Peltier, the extreme point of land just below the mouth of the St. Joseph river, so attractive in rural beauty, is said to have been the accustomed place for burning prisoners. As a means of terror to their enemies, the Miamis, or Minneways, had early formed here what was commonly known as a 'man-eating society,' which to make it more fearful to their opponents was firmly established on a hereditary basis, confined to one family alone, whose descendents continued to exercise, by right of descent, the savage rites and duties of the man-eating society.[3]

[3]Mr. Colerick records this as having been written by the Honorable Jesse E. Williams, of Fort Wayne, in his historical essays, p.11. Such a source does not appear extant. A portion of the quotation, "the extreme point of land.....accustomed place for burning prisoners," does appear on p.11 of Williams, J. L: Historical Sketch of the First Presbyterian Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, Daily News Printing House, Fort Wayne, 1881.

There is also the testimony of General Lewis Cass as to the existance at one time of man-eaters among the Miami Indians. He, no doubt, said Mr. Colerick, was the best informed man on the history and traditions of the Indian tribes of the Northwest, then living. In a noted oration delivered at Fort Wayne on the occasion of the opening of the Wabash and Erie canal, July 4, 1843, he said:

> For many years during the frontier history of this place and region, the line of your canal was a bloody warpath, which has seen many a deed of horror. And this peaceful town has had its Moloch, and the records of human depravity furnish no more terrible examples of cruelty than were offered at his shrine. The Miami Indians, our predecessors in the occupation of this district, had a terrible institution whose origin and object have been lost in the darkness of aboriginal history, but which was continued to a late period, and whose orgies were held upon the very spot where we now are. It was called the 'man-eating society', and it was the duty of its associates to eat such prisoners as were preserved and delivered to them for that purpose. The members of this society belonged to a particular family, and the dreadful inheritance descended to all the children, male and female. The duties it imposed could not be avoided, and the sanctions of religion were added to the obligations of immemorial usage. The feast was a solemn ceremony, at which the whole tribe was collected as actors or spectators. The miserable victim was bound to the stake and burned at a slow fire, with all the refinements of cruelty, which savage ingenuity could invent. There was a traditionary ritual, which regulated with revolting precision the whole course of procedure at these ceremonies. Latterly the authority and obligations of the institution had declined, and I presume it has now wholly disappeared. But I have often seen and conversed with the head of the family, the chief of the society,

whose name was 'White Skin,' with what feeling of disgust I need not attempt to describe. I well know an intelligent Canadian who was present at one of the last sacrifices made at this horrible institution. The victim was a young American captured in Kentucky toward the close of our revolutionary war. Here, where we are now assembled in peace and security, celebrating the triumph of art and industry, within the memory of the present generation, our countrymen have been thus tortured, and murdered, and devoured. But, thank God, that council-fire is extinguished. The impious feast is over; the war-dance is ended; the war song is sung; the war drum is silent, and the Indian has departed, to find, I hope, in the distant West, a comfortable residence, and, I hope, also to find, under the protection and if need be, under the power of the United States, a radical change in the institutions and general improvement in morals and condition. A feeble remnant of the once powerful tribe which formerly won their way to the domination of this region by blood and by blood maintained it, have today appeared among us like passing shadows, flitting around the places that know them no more. Their resurrection, if I may so speak, is not the least impressive spectacle, which marks the progress of this imposing ceremony. They are the broken column which connects us with the past. The edifice is in ruins, and the giant vegetation, which covered and protected it, lies as low as the once mighty structure, which was shelved in its recesses. They have come to witness the first great act of peace in our frontier history, as their presence here is the last in their own. The ceremonies upon which you heretofore gazed with interest will never again be seen by the white man in this seat of their former power. But, thanks to our ascendency, these representations are but a pageant, but a theatrical exhibition, which, with barbarous motions and sounds and contortions, show how their ancestors conquered their

enemies and they glutted their revenge in blood. Today this last of the race is here -- tomorrow they will commence their journey toward the setting sun, where their fathers, agreeable to their rude faith have preceded them, and where the red man will find rest and safety.[4]

[4]The portion of the speech presented here is as given by Mr. Colerick. The oration in full is to be found in Canal Celebrations in Old Fort Wayne, Prepared by the Staff of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County, 1955, pp. 54-79.